

Determining an Abuser's Lethality

There can never be a guarantee of women's and children's safety in an abusive situation. Nonetheless, it is extremely important to determine how dangerous a partner is and to have a [safety plan](#).

It is critical to consider the potential for lethality within an abusive relationship. Without effective intervention, domestic violence can escalate in severity and in some instances result in homicide. Studies consistently report that 75% of domestic violence related homicides occur after the victim has left the batterer and the batterer believes he no longer has the power to get the victim back into the relationship and under his control. The vast majority of all homicides committed in Maine each year are domestic violence related and most of these murders are committed after the victim has attempted to end the relationship. Although no one can accurately predict when or if a batterer will kill or escalate violence into a life threatening level, the following indicators can serve as warning signs that a batterer may be reaching that level. It is important to note that while these indicators are a valuable assessment tool, the presence or absence of one or more indicators cannot definitively predict the behavior of a batterer. The most important indication of life threatening violence is the victim's perception of her danger. If the woman is very afraid and says she will be killed or may be killed, then the possibility of life threatening violence is present. National experts on domestic violence note, "Battered women are usually the best evaluators of the potential for lethal violence because they generally have more information about the batterer than anyone other than the batterer himself (Hart, 1988). At the present time, it appears that the best approach to screening for life-threatening violence is a combination of the woman's perspective and the advocate's assessment (Davies, 1998).

It is important to consider the following:

- ❑ **Threats of homicide or suicide.** These must be considered extremely dangerous. Batterers may threaten suicide, but they will want to take their partners as well.
- ❑ **Weapons.** The use of guns is a strong predictor, but threats and access to weapons should also be considered life-threatening.
- ❑ **Alcohol and/or drug use.**
- ❑ **Extreme jealousy and obsessive need to control or monitor partner's behavior ;** refusal to end the relationship even if divorced; feels entitled; violates protection orders; follows; jealous of new partner (you will never belong to another!); often imagines things; has distorted thinking; believes there can be no life without partner. These are very life endangering behaviors.
- ❑ **Surveillance of activities.** Will go to extremes to monitor behavior.
- ❑ **Stalking**
- ❑ **Separation.** When abusers believe they are about to lose their partners and can't envision life without them, they may choose to kill. This is a very dangerous time. (Some kill long before they have any idea that the relationship will end.)
- ❑ **Depression.** Research shows that many people who are hospitalized for depression have fantasies directed at family members.
- ❑ **History of Mental Health Problems**
- ❑ **Escalation of Abuse**
- ❑ **History of Sexual Abuse of Victim or Children**

- ❑ **Violation of Protective Orders or Restraining Orders-**
- ❑ **Acts of Abuse in Public-**
- ❑ **Access to Victim-** Careful safety planning may help limit contact abuser has with partner.

**Call the Battered Women's Project in state 24-hour hotline number 1-800-439-2323,
out of state hotline number 207-769-8251**